DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 639 CS 202 728

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TITLE Facts before Judgments: Thoughts about Teaching Composition.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference (Boston, April 2-4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Involvement; *Composition Skills (Literary); *Literary Analysis; Motivation Techniques; *Relevance (Education); Secondary Education; *Student Motivation; *Technical Writing
IDENTIFIERS *Factual Writing

ABSTRACT

Secondary level composition classes can benefit from the assignment of factual papers. While literary analysis falls prey to subjective evaluation, the organization and synthesis of factual information eludes judgemental decisions. In addition, this approach can be relevant to the society in which the student lives by providing a field of subject matter in media-neglected local and civic issues. Recognition of student compositions can take the form of modified public debates by students or student prepared information brochures on community services. Factual information, easier for the student to handle and for the teacher to evaluate, can provide an important motivation for student achievement. (KS)

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FACTS BEFORE JUDGMENTS: THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING COMPOSITION

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Paper to be presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Secondary Section in Boston, Massachusetts, 3 April 1976.

I am very pleased and honored to have been invited to speak to you at this meeting. In a sense I have returned to my beginnnings. My very first teaching job, one year after my graduation from college, was to teach English composition at the 9th, 10th, and 11th grade level. My students were all boys, and they were nearly all bilingual because they came from a variety of ethnic stocks--Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, Portugese, Hawaiian, and Caucasian. My first day of teaching still remains vivid in my memory as an unmitigated disaster. Ten minutes after the start of my first class I had taught every last thing I knew--I had nothing left to say, not for the rest of the hour, the rest of the week, the rest of the year.

And this was not particularly surprising because during my undergraduate education at Kenyon College I had specialized in Biology. I could breed fruit flies, dissect cats and frogs, and make slides of various tissue cultures, but I had taken just three courses in English: Freshman Composition, a course in Literary Criticism, and a course in Creative Writing. It was because of these last two courses that I wound up at Iolani School in Honolulu, Hawaii, teaching English composition. The criticism and creative writing courses were taught by John Crowe Ransom and the only reason that I took them was that he was the "big name" on Kenyon's faculty. I enjoyed his courses all right and concentrated on writing poetry because poems were short and took less time to write than stories or plays, but I didn't do so well as my classmates, Robert Lowell, who went on to write more poems after graduation, or Robie Macauley who is now the fiction editor of *Playboy* magazine.

But when I graduated in 1939 no one wanted a biologist, so I went to work as a machinist in Toledo, Ohio, at 50 cents an hour, 12 hours a day. Then one day the Alumni Secretary of Kenyon College wrote that there was a job open in Honolulu teaching prep school Biology. Would

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I care to apply? With visions of palm trees and hula girls I promptly dispatched my application and requested letters of recommendation from the head of the Biology Department, the President of the College, and, just to provide balance, from John Crowe Ransom.

A month went by, then came a cablegram: "Offer you position teaching English. Nine hundred dollars per year and found." I was baffled. I was a Biologist, not an English major. But I was willing to do anything to get out of Toledo, Ohio.

It turned out that by the time my application arrived the Headmaster had already hired a Biologist, but shortly thereafter he had fired an English teacher for making passes at his nubile daughter, and out of desperation seized upon Ransom's recommendation and hired me as a replacement.

I tell you this because the only formal training in teaching English composition I ever had came from Headmaster Stone and I find that I still follow his precepts. He had served as a missionary in China and held that the only way to teach the English language to those who did not know it well--and he was sure that no 9th, 10th or 11th grade boy could possibly know it well--was to require the boy to write a composition every single week. Now I taught five classes a day, five days a week, four in English the other in Current Events, and there were 30 boys in each class. That meant that Headmaster Stone expected me to assign, and moreover to read, mark up, and grade, 120 compositions, every week. To make sure that I assigned those compositions, he required me to turn in to him a detailed set of lesson plans for each class at the start of each week. And he wanted to see *how* I marked up those compositions, so I was asked to submit sample sets of compositions to him at frequent intervals. Moreover, at least once a month he came into the classroom of every teacher on his staff and sat through the class hour to see how the teacher handled the class. I am afraid that I saw a great deal less of the white sands and the hula girls than I had counted on. But my Hawaiian students had it easy compared to my eight year old son who, when we spent a Fulbright year in Pakistan, was under the tutelage of a teacher born and reared in Yorkshire, England. *She* made every one of her second grade students write a composition every single night and take a spelling test every single day.

I still believe that the only successful way to teach any art, and writing is an art, is through practice, constant practice. Further,

this practice must be subject to tough, unsparing criticism. Today I teach three composition classes instead of the four I taught in Hawaii, and I have fewer students in each class, but I still require either a composition or speech every week, and I still mark up those compositions in detail, trying to catch every spelling error and suggesting revisions for every poorly organized sentence.

My students now are, of course, very different from those high school students I started out teaching and very different from most of the high school students you teach. The key difference between my senior engineering students and your high school students is that mine are specialists who know more about the subject they are writing about than I, the English teacher, do and more than the rest of their reading audience will know as well. My job is to help them make what they are talking about clear and persuasive to whoever reads their reports. If I can't understand what they mean, the chances are excellent that other people won't be able to understand it either. Thus, many times a class meeting turns into a session where I am the only student and the group of undergraduate engineers are teachers trying hard to pound into my thick skull why a higher frequency range in a radio signal means a larger bandwidth and consequently a greater channel capacity.

The writing that I deal with is thus almost entirely devoted to the analysis and presentation of *facts*. This does not mean that judgmental statements and conclusions are excluded. Quite the contrary. The reports that these engineering students write are most frequently concerned with an experimental investigation or with a design--the design of a ship, an aircraft, a chemical plant, a biomedical device, an electronic circuit. They are engaged in answering the question: "What, in your judgment, is the best way to solve the following problem?" This is the question posed them by the engineering professors in the student's senior-level courses. My task is to help them write a good answer. That answer must be solidly based on factual evidence, persuasively presented. Otherwise the report will be a failure. And I am personally concerned that this report be thorough and honest and competent because someday I may fly in an aircraft, sail in a ship, or be dependent upon a biomedical device designed by one of these students.

It might seem that such factual writing would be very dull and uninteresting and exceptionally difficult to grade. I cannot pretend that every report my students submit arouses my enthusiasm, but most of

them do. I enjoy reading how an Electrical Engineering student designed a $50 device consisting of a Pringles can, a clock motor, and a simple radio circuit to record the weather maps Washington broadcasts to weather stations across the country. I thought it was interesting enough to send in to *Scientific American* for possible publication. A Chemical Engineer's report on the potential dangers of polychlorinated biphenyls, PCB's for short, certainly caught my attention, as did a demonstration of voice transmission down the beam of light produced by a laser, rather than down a wire.

But the important point is that, for me at least, such factual writing is much easier to evaluate and grade than are judgmental interpretations of literature commonly assigned in both courses labeled "composition" and in courses labeled "literature." When an English teacher, that is a trained one, not someone like me, asks a student to write an evaluation or a critical analysis of a piece of literature, the teacher creates a situation in which the *less* informed is writing for the *more* informed, the *less* experienced is writing for the *more* experienced. In real life communication normally flows in the opposite direction, from those who know to those who do not.

Whenever I, pretending to be well informed about literature, assign a literary analysis to a class of students who presumably know less about it than I do, I often find it a difficult task to explain to less diffident students why I gave them the grades I did--which always seem to them to be too low.

This may well be due to my lack of training in English, but I have heard my better trained colleagues also engaged in disputations with students who fail to understand why the analysis of a short story or drama that they have submitted, although relatively free of grammatical and syntactic errors, fails to meet the instructor's standards for a better than merely average paper. The answer is, of course, that the student's arguments failed to persuade the instructor because the instructor is older, more widely read, and more experienced in evaluating human motives from verbal and non-verbal cues. Perhaps just as important, the student does not have a Ph.D. in English, so *nothing* he could write would completely satisfy the instructor. I add this last comment from my own sad experience; nothing I have ever written about literature has been, in the eyes of my colleagues, worth more than a C-. But come to think of it, nothing written by anyone else in my department, even with an

English Ph.D., has ever been rated better than a B either; so maybe there is hope if I keep working at it.

There is another reason. Analytical judgments of human motivation and character are likely to be strongly influenced by the cultural backgrounds on either side of the instructor's desk. If these backgrounds are different, if the teacher comes from one background, the student from another, the teacher may well have a very difficult task in justifying the contention that his or her judgment in a particular case is superior to the student's. For example, when I spent a year teaching in the Muslim country of Pakistan, I never could persuade the majority of my students that the American female college student was not a loose woman with the morals of a mink. The Pakistani students triumphantly pointed to copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* where American coeds were photographed *not wearing veils*.

Moreover, from the student's point of view--that is, from the point of view of the fellow who is going to have to do the hard work of the actual writing--it is a lot easier to handle facts than it is to handle evaluations. To evaluate means to compare, and you can only compare something with something you already know. And simply because he is young, the average high school senior or college freshman knows comparatively little. He is 17 or 18 years old and has been required by state law to spend two-thirds of his life in the classroom; he has been forbidden to marry, to hold any but the most menial jobs, and only on his 18th birthday will he be permitted to join the august company of voting adults. To ask him to judge the character and motives of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, a 65-year old, thrice-married, general and dictator, is asking a good deal. The number of persons of like attributes he has met is fairly limited.

But it is not asking too much of him to have him describe the changes that have taken place in his home country between the years 1960 and 1970. All he needs for this are facts and numbers and those are in such abundance that the problem is not how to find them but how to deal with them all. He can start with the U.S. Census Reports which will tell him not only about the people, but also about their housing, their transportation, and their agriculture. The Rand-McNally Commercial Atlas will count the number of drugstores and supermarkets for him. The Bureau of Labor Statistics will count the jobs and employment figures; the Federal Communications Commission, the radio and TV stations; the

U.S. Forest Service, the trees and lumber produced; and so on almost ad infinitum.

Given this mountain of facts the student will be faced with the job of analyzing and synthesizing them into a digestible whole. But analysis and synthesis are, as Benjamin Bloom points out in his *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, easier to accomplish than evaluation, the highest level of intellectual activity.

Even the professional writer finds it easier to deal with facts. As Brendan Gill says in *Here At The New Yorker*:

> In my experience, the risk of failure in writing fiction is far greater than the risk of failure in writing all the different sorts of pieces that we lump together under the word "fact"....
>
> ... in the writing of fact the seasoned writer nearly always knows at the outset what his chances are. The terrain lies open before him; he can see precisely where he is and where he means to go. ... One has only to remain steadfast to one's purpose and to tamper as little as possible with the weight of the facts... work, work, and the thing is done.
>
> The writing and reading of fiction require strong convictions as well as strong emotions, and this is a time when we find it easier to respond to the social, political, and economic problems besetting man than to lofty speculations about his nature. The great abstractions--God, ourselves as an act of special creation, the hereafter--upon which, however indirectly, the fiction of the past was based, have become irrelevant for most of us and, for some of us, simply do not exist.

For these reasons I suggest that critical, judgmental essays about literature are not the most direct and effective ways to teach students how to communicate effectively in writing. This does not mean that such essays are useless; indeed, they undoubtedly serve as effective testing devices to determine whether or not the student has actually read the literature he was assigned to read. Moreover, the *correctness* of the student's writing--his spelling, grammar, and sentence construction--can be effectively criticized and thus improved through essays of this type. But correctness should be a *sine qua non*; good writing requires more than mere correctness; it requires an appropriate choice and arrangement of evidence, a proper selection of issues, and above all it requires *style*. And it seems to me that we learn style by imitation, by being exposed to good style. And this is best accomplished by reading good literature. So I am a strong supporter of courses in literature, although I would tend to urge the literature

teacher to assign extensive reading lists, to let each author speak for himself, intruding only as necessary to elucidate puzzling features of the story, to advertise other, equally interesting stories beyond the assigned reading, and to avoid hours spent in pursuing symbols and dissecting single works for their critical values. My own high school English teacher, the late Leonard Rice at Hill School did this when he taught drama. Dramas to him were simply good stories. I recall to this day my delighted and surprised discovery that the school library contained whole shelves of dramas that Rice had mentioned in passing. Here was a feast spread out before me, and I fell upon it like a glutton.

But back to composition. You are more interested in what I think I would do if I were now to start over again and begin teaching composition in a secondary school.

The first thing I would worry about is student motivation. Good writing requires work, hard work; and anyone who works hard would like to see his effort recognized--recognized, not merely rewarded. As an editorial consultant I have sometimes been paid to write explanations of new engineering devices or techniques. Although I appreciated the money, the experience has often been frustrating because my work has been recognized--that is, commented on--only by the one or two people whose device or technique I was explaining. How it was received by the ultimate reader, I only learned second hand from passing comments like, "Oh yes, they liked it fine." These reports were not published in any national journal, so I did not even have the satisfaction of seeing my name in print. A writer whose hours of labor receive so little attention is bound to feel the same sense of loss as Echo felt when jealous Hera condemned her never to speak for herself. As you all know, Echo withered away.

And this same sense of loss must inevitably be felt by the student who spends hours working on a paper only to have it read by a single person, the composition instructor, who will reward him with a grade, but who cannot provide the public recognition that means so much more. Meanwhile, similar effort spent on the football field, in play rehearsals practicing with the band or orchestra, *will* provide public recognition, even if there is no other reward. So if the student puts in more time on extra-curricular activities than he does on writing themes, it is scarcely surprising.

For this reason I would seek to design a composition course which

required the students to produce factual papers, rather than judgmental ones, which will be recognized as well as rewarded.

My engineering students already produce factual papers, as I have explained. But they get recognition too. At the end of the term each one gives a 10-minute lecture on his paper topic and the general public, all the professors in the College of Engineering, and the student's friends and relatives are invited to attend. Moreover, these lectures are recorded on video-tape and played on Ann Arbor's Cable TV network and later placed in the University Library where anyone can view them. The prospect of being put on public display this way seems to me to motivate these students very strongly, perhaps especially because I invite two members of this audience, an engineer and a non-engineer, to recommend the final grade the student should receive for his written and oral report, and thus for the entire semester's work.

Now such a system might work at the college level, but could it be adapted to fit a high school class? I believe it could, but the topics for papers would naturally have to be different.

I should think that the controversial public issues of the type normally selected as propositions for your high school debating teams would serve this purpose admirably. Every city council and state legislature has dozens of such controversial bills introduced in each session, most of them generating strong feelings, and your councilman, state legislator, or local League of Women Voters can easily provide you with more than enough such issues to occupy your students. Moreover, everyone likes to hear a good, knock-down-drag-out argument. But I would modify the customary debate team format which seems to me to emphasize the rapid recitation of the greatest possible number of evidence cards in the shortest possible time in order to impress a single debate judge in the back of the room. You simply can't hold the attention of, let alone persuade, an audience of any size this way. I would limit each speaker to one speech about 10-minutes long, and at the conclusion of these prepared remarks would open the floor to questions from the audience. And I would ask the audience, not merely a single judge, to decide who wins by calling for a division of the house on the proposition itself, not on the quality of the speakers. Some people will abstain if you merely ask for a show of hands; they can't if they are required to move. And as I do with my own students, I would ask two members of the audience to read the students' written arguments, as

well as listen to their speeches, and recommend their final grade in the course.

The collecting of the evidence for such an argument is not a difficult task, and I have a technique for library research which enables one of my classes to produce something like a 50-page annotated bibliography on almost any topic in one week. But this is the subject for another paper altogether.

But if you don't like debate and argument, I think there are other sorts of topics which would lend themselves to the same sort of public written and oral performance and thus recognition and motivation. There are all sorts of local, civic issues about which the public is poorly informed, not because the news media neglects them, but because the stories about them occur over scattered intervals of time and no one bothers to produce a comprehensive analysis which can be easily digested. For example, as I write this the *Ann Arbor News* is running a full two-column public notice about a proposed change in a drainage district. The facts are all there, but in legal language, like,

> Commencing at the South 1/4 corner of Section, 25, T2S, R5E, Scio Township, Washtenaw County, Michigan, thence S 88 deg.- 32 min.- 10 sec. E 365.03 feet along the south line of said section for a Place of Beginning; thence N 5 deg.- 31 min.-20 sec. E 835.30 feet ...

Two solid newspaper columns of this, and all completely incomprehensible to me and to most average readers; yet it might be of very great concern to me if I understood it. Here is the sort of topic that I think any high school student could clarify with a little effort, and I would be interested in hearing how he explained it and I suspect other people in Ann Arbor would too.

In the *Scientific American* of September 1972, Peter Goldmark, inventor of the long playing record and the first practical color television, discusses "Communication and the Community" and points out that there are surprisingly few effective communication channels between city officials and the community and vice-versa. He suggests that several community information centers be set up to which citizens might refer to find out where to go to get the information or the service they need. Information brochures on the wide variety of services the average city provides would be needed, and here is the sort of thing high school students could prepare and for which they could receive recognition.

In conclusion, if I were once again teaching secondary school composition, I would emphasize factual papers because they are easier for the student to handle, because they can be immediately relevant to the society in which the student lives, and because they lend themselves to the public recognition which every writer instinctively seeks.